

SATURDAY, JULY 5, 1873.

Subject: The Nature, Importance and Liberties
of Belief.

PLYMOUTH PULPIT:

A Weekly Publication

OF

SERMONS

PREACHED BY

HENRY WARD BEECHER.



New-York:

J. B. FORD & CO., No. 27 PARK PLACE.

—
1873.

AMERICAN NEWS COMPANY, AGENTS FOR THE TRADE.

European Agents, SAMPSON LOW, SON, & MARSTON, Crown Buildings, 188 Fleet Street, London.

Sold by all Carriers and News Dealers.

AUTHORIZATION.

Brooklyn, January, 1869.

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THE NATURE, IMPORTANCE AND LIBERTIES OF BELIEF.

"Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God? He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him? And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee. And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshiped him."—John ix. 35-38.

It is very plain to any one at all acquainted with the literature and the habits of thought in the two lands—the Hebrew and the Grecian—that *belief* in Jerusalem meant one thing, and that *belief* at Athens meant another and a very different thing. If, at Jerusalem, a man believed, it was taken in a religious sense, as a token of personal fealty to God. It was understood to be the relation of a man's own self to his Master. It was regarded in the sense of the perfect and absorbing fidelity of a soldier to his general, of a clansman to his chief, or of a child to his parent. But in Greece, although there was belief, yet, in the philosophic sense of the term, believing was interpreted to mean the accepting of certain definite propositions of truth or fact. It was, therefore, in the main, an intellectual process.

After our Master's ascent, the preaching of the early day was the preaching of Christ, and of his simple teaching, for the sake of producing a given condition of life and character. This was peculiarly in accordance with the genius of the Hebrews.

I have already said, on a recent occasion, that, in the early periods of the Church, the power of the Christian religion was manifested more by the example of Christians than by any formal setting forth of creeds, or by any philosophic cogency of truths which must have lain at the bottom of those creeds.

After a time, however, creed-making came into vogue. It sprang, in the first instance, from the Greeks. It expanded itself mainly, in so far as the Greek schools were concerned, in defining

and organizing the faith of the early ages in respect to the great themes of divinity—the nature of God, the nature of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and their co-operative relation, trinity in unity. The speculations of the Greek mind tended toward the psychological elements, as they were then understood.

When, later, the Roman mind began to exercise itself upon creeds, the lower forms of truth naturally came in. The elaboration of moral government, and the organization of the Church, and the establishment of its ordinances and polity, were largely the work of the Roman mind.

So that we had first, simple Christianity, as it appeared among the Jews, evolving power by the life which it educed. Then came in, running through centuries, the Greek mind, formulating higher phases of morality in respect to the divine nature. Afterwards came the Roman genius, fashioning the visible material Church, the vast ecclesiastical system, and giving, also, a large increment to the creeds of Christendom. And it came to pass, in those days, not only that the Church grew, but that it grew more and more into a national form; and belief became very largely what crime and virtue or obedience are in the civil government. As a good citizen is one who obeys the laws and fulfills a citizen's duties, and as a bad citizen is one who breaks the laws and commits vice and crime, so he was a good churchman who believed in the Church and what the Church taught, and he was a bad churchman or Christian—for they were considered as identical—who did not believe in these things. And as it was held that the salvation of men's souls depended upon their right believing, the next and the legitimate and logical deduction was, that it was more important to mankind that they should be compelled to believe, for the sake of their soul's salvation in the future, than that they should enjoy present comfort. Then arose persecution for belief's sake in the Roman Church, which, in the period of men's ignorance, became universal, but which, after the Reformation set in, slowly waned.

As late as the time of Elizabeth, belief in the actual presence of the Holy Communion was a matter of life and death in England. No one who has considerably read the history of that period—and the impression cannot be more vividly derived from any other work than Froude's, which, with all its faults, is a brilliant and admirable history of England—can fail to see that to believe right on the question of the Lord's Supper was just as important as it was to live right with reference to the most vital laws of property in the state. Treason against orthodoxy was just as fatal as treason against sovereignty; and the state attempted to enforce the law

against both. When right believing was the condition on which a man held his property, his place in the state, and his very life, you can very well understand that creeds had an importance which they have slowly lost.

Then intense earnestness in the inculcation of the infallibility of the Roman Church and of ecclesiasticism in the Episcopal Church took another shape in what were called "reformed" churches. They were reformed in respect to jealousy of creeds. Right believing was considered as equivalent to right living. And during the days of enforced faith it was a matter of life and death to believe right.

And when the power of this monstrous superstition was so far broken that men were allowed to believe in Roman, or Episcopal, or Presbyterian, or any other sectarian scheme of doctrine, the spirit was not gone; for each sect took the matter of belief into its own creed, and though it disavowed any authority over men at large, it exerted a powerful authority upon all its own members. The Roman Church still insisted upon all the doctrines of Romanism. The Reformed Church of England insisted upon the apostolicity and authority of that Church. The Presbyterian Church, following Calvin, insisted upon its peculiar doctrines. The Genevese churches insisted on the doctrines which were special to them. All the so-called evangelical churches emphasized the necessity of being sound in the faith. It was considered a great stretch of charity when, in Holland, it was determined to insist only upon adhesion to the commands, to leave men at liberty in non-essentials to believe either way, and to hold them to account and discipline simply for believing those things which were necessary to the formation of Christian character.

Now, it turned out that in all beliefs and in all churches there were Christian men, their fruits being taken as the criterion of judgment. It was found that the Arminian Church had in it good Christian men. It was found that the Arians had good Christian men among them. It was discovered that the grace of God could find elements of Christianity in the hearts of men who stood over against the Church in matters of creed. And so there began to be a powerful reaction—a reaction which might have been expected from the undue rigor with which believing had been enforced by pain and penalty through many hundreds and even thousands of years.

In our day, we are at the extreme of reaction against creeds. Almost everybody, now-a-days, is denouncing dogmas; and not half of those that do it know what they mean by *dogmas*. Almost

everybody is denouncing systems of theology ; and it would task the majority of those that do it to give any sort of an account of what is meant by *systems of theology*. Multitudes of men are talking about right living and right dispositions being the main thing. They say, " If you have these, it does not matter what your theology is." In one sense this is true ; and yet, we are at the other extreme of reaction. We are going as far in opposition to the enunciation of precise, accurate, systematized belief, as our forefathers went in favor of it.

I propose, this morning, to offer some considerations on the subject of the nature of belief, of its importance, and of its liberties.

One first meets the question, " Is belief a normal and legitimate state of mind, subject to every man's will in such a sense that he is accountable for what he believes ?" My reply is, that our belief is partly voluntary, and partly involuntary ; and that in so far as it is voluntary we are accountable for it, while in so far as it is constitutional, and dependent on circumstances over which we have no control, we are not accountable for it.

A man is accountable, for instance, for the state and disposition with which he comes to the investigation of truth. If there be a life hereafter, and if the law of cause and effect continue as a man approaches the gulf of death in such a manner that the way in which he lives here determines the way in which he will live in the world to come—at any rate, during the initial periods of his existence there—then it is of transcendent importance that a man should form a religious belief according to facts and according to the truth. In other words, it is a man's duty to attend to the subject, and to think about it. He is bound to put his mind in such an attitude that he shall be likely to think right. He is so to discharge all prejudices, and partial biases, and partisan influences from his mind, that he can attend to the evidences of the truth fairly and honestly. A man is called upon to investigate. He is responsible for right belief ; and if from neglect of investigation he believes wrong, or does not believe at all, he is culpable for the wrong belief or the unbelief.

On the other hand, there is much of men's belief that they cannot help. If a man, for instance, have an arithmetical proposition presented to him, it is not the question whether he will or will not accept it. If it be presented so that it can be comprehended, he *must* accept it. Two and two make four, not because you have a right mind, not by any courtesy on your part, and not on account of the faith which men have in the results of arithmetic : it is imperative. But where men are investigating a

large field of truths, it is unquestionably true that the character of the mind which they bring to the investigation will determine largely the way in which they see the truth. A man who has a mere factual nature; a man who perceives without much power of reflection; a man who sees only facts, cannot come to any such judgment of truths as the man, higher than he, who not only perceives facts, but has also, by his mental constitution, the power to reason upon them, and to deduce the generic from the specific—that is, the principle from the facts. If it be investigation into the nature of truth as it is contained in the Word of God, a man's moral disposition will color his beliefs. If one, for instance, be largely conscientious, and endowed with small benevolence, the nature of his mind will make him sensitive to those representations of Scripture which depict God as standing upon law; as maintaining righteousness; as being good and just, rather than benevolent and sympathetic. If, on the other hand, a man be himself kind and benevolent, and if he have little conscientiousness, then the elements of sympathy will predominate in the God that he depicts, and the elements which tend towards legality will be comparatively wanting in him. Evidence of justice and law will make but a small impression on such a man, while evidence of goodness will make a prodigious impression upon him.

Now, evidence to a man is that which convinces his mind. It varies with different men. An argument to a man who cannot reason is no evidence. Facts are no evidence to a man who cannot perceive them. A sentimental appeal is evidence to a man whose very nature moves by emotion, though it may not be to his neighbor.

So then, when men come to the investigation of truth, they are responsible, first, for research, for honesty therein, for being diligent, and for attempting to cleanse their minds from all bias of selfishness and pride. They are responsible for sincerity and faithfulness in the investigation of truth. And when they go beyond that to the use of their faculties, the combination of those faculties will determine very largely, not, perhaps, the generic nature of truth, but specific developments of it. And as long as the world stands there will be men who will hold that God is a God of infinite love and sympathy and goodness with a residuum of justice; and there will be men who will believe that God is a God of justice with a residuum of love and sympathy and goodness; and each will follow the law of his own mind. As a magnet, drawn through a vessel containing sand and particles of iron, attracts the particles of iron but does not attract the sand; so the faculties of a man's mind appropriate certain facts and reject others. What is

evidence to a man will depend upon those of his faculties which are at work upon the things which are presented as evidence.

When, then, men say to me, "I am not responsible for my belief," I say to them, "Yes, you are;" and when, on the other hand, men say to me, "You are responsible for just what you believe," I say, "No, I am not;" and I am right both when I affirm and when I deny. In certain respects I am responsible, and in certain other respects I am not responsible. When a man presents to me a truth in mathematics, with all manner of formulas, the more he demonstrates it, the more I am in a cloud. It is clear as crystal to him, and it is murky as midnight to me. It does not find me. On the other hand, when a man brings to me the elements of a truth which depends largely upon sympathy with that which is in nature, I have an intuition as quick as a flash of lightning. No reasoning is required to enable me to comprehend it. But if I make the same statement to another man who has no such intuition, he will look blank at it. That which I felt quiveringly, to the very core, I cannot make him understand.

Take an example in another relation, which is perhaps more familiar to your observation. A quiet remark is made at some convivial entertainment, and you feel it. The faculty of mirth is excited in you, and you shake with laughter. Right by your side is one who heard precisely the same thing—a most decorous and excellent man; and he says, "Explain it to me: I do not perceive it, sir." You explain it, and he says, "Well, I presume it is, sir, as you say, but I do not yet perceive it." It is not his fault that the sense of humor is lacking in his nature; but truths of humor cannot present themselves to him as they do to you or to me.

The Scriptures make the test of believing to lie in the life and in the disposition. They nowhere require men, as the condition of acceptance and salvation, to be technically and philosophically right on all points of belief; but they do require that a man, in the presence of truth, using it as he pleases, selecting it according to the analysis and attractions and repulsions of his own nature, should live right. They hold men accountable for the development of their manhood on the pattern of Christ Jesus. They say, "Here are the truths of God; sort them, use them, every man according to his own liberty, in the spirit, and not in the letter." You are called to liberty; but it is that every one of you may become men in Christ Jesus. Men are held accountable for manhood, but not for the way in which they use the instruments by which the manhood is produced.

It is with the mind as it is with the body, in this respect. The

physician says to a household, "Here is the great realm of food. Eat that which agrees with you. The same kinds of food do not agree with all people. If you grow healthy on the food that I loathe, that is the food for you, although it disagrees with me; and if I grow healthy on the food that you loathe, that is the food for me, although it disagrees with you." And it is very much so in the matter of believing. All cannot believe the same things, or cannot believe things in the same way.

"But," say men, "believing amounts to nothing if one man may believe one thing, and another man another thing." Well, let me ask, then, Is it not possible for truth to be so large that ten men shall believe it differently, and yet each one of them so sectionally and personally believe it, that they shall all be true though none of them has more than partial truth, and that all ten of them shall compass the whole truth?

I look at a large tree on the lawn, and say to my neighbor, "What is that tree to you?" He looks at it, and says, "Well, I think that would cut about twenty cords of wood. You could work in a good many branches, and as the price of wood is in the market I think I could make fifty dollars out of that tree, easily, and perhaps more than that." His answer shows what the tree is to him—and it *is* that. I call up a boy, and say to him, "What do you think of when you look at that tree?" "Ah!" he says, "there will be a bushel of hickory-nuts on that tree, anyhow;" and he begins to think how he will climb it, and shake them down, and what he will do with them. That is what the tree says to him. I say to another person, "What is that tree to you?" He says, "I would not take fifty dollars for it. Under it my cows stand in summer. The shade of that tree has stood me in stead of a shed ever since I owned this farm. That tree is worth its weight in gold." He values it for its economic uses. I ask a painter, "What is that tree to you?" At once he says, "Do you see what an exquisite form it has? How picturesque it is? If you were to take it and put it in the foreground of the landscape that I am working on, what a magnificent effect you would get!" It has an æsthetic value to him. I ask another man, "What is it to you?" He goes into an explanation of its structure and qualities. He is a botanist, and he has his peculiar view of it. I ask myself, "What is that tree?" It is everything. It is God's voice, when the winds are abroad. It is God's thought, when in the deep stillness of the noon it is silent. It is the house which God has built for a thousand birds. It is a harbor of comfort to weary men and to the cattle of the field. It is that which has in it the record of ages. There it has stood for a

century. The winter could not kill it, and the summer could not destroy it. It is full of beauty and strength. It has in it all these things; and as different men look at it, each looks at so much of it as he needs; but it takes ten men to see everything that there is in that tree—and they all do not half see it.

So it is with truths. Men sort them. They bring different faculties to bear in considering them. One person has philosophical reason; another has factual reason. One man brings one part of his mind to it; another brings to it another part of his mind. The truth is larger than any one man's thought of it. The truth of God usually has relations that stretch out in such a way that men may see it very differently, and all of them be true in spots, although they do not have the whole truth.

The importance of belief is transcendent, therefore; and yet it may be entirely consistent with the ideas which I have been enunciating. Truth may be very different in its impressions on different minds; and yet the grand central verity towers up above men. It is important, not that men should believe just alike in every shade and color, but that men should believe clearly, definitely, and accurately, and bring fidelity to their beliefs. Believing is a matter of great importance in every way. No doctrine of believing can be more emasculating than that which allows men to take things as they come along, now siding with this school, now with that, and now with another.

"Manhood is the main thing," men say. It is true, manhood is the main thing; but suppose I say to a person, "Which direction shall I take to go to the city forty miles distant?" and he replies, "It does not so much matter, my friend, about the road, so that you get there." I know that; but I think the getting there will have a relation to the swamps and hills and various obstructions between here and there. The question is, "What road is the most likely to get me there the easiest, and in the least time?"

Now, manhood is the thing; and if it exists you have no right to question what method it came by: but if you are seeking, by the light of experience, the most probable way of educating manhood, then it is of great importance what way you take to accomplish it.

In the material world, nobody believes respecting scientific facts as men allow themselves to believe in regard to theological truths. What we believe determines what we do. A man says, "I am a true man, and I do not believe in your scientific truths." Do not you believe in the abstract doctrine of gravitation? Do not you believe there is such a thing as attraction of gravitation? He does: if he did not, he never would go down stairs except with one

step. If he did not, he never would rear children in the vicinity of precipices or ledges. You believe in the doctrine of light and electricity. There are many scientific truths and facts which men must believe in as the substratum of government, in order to preserve their lives and use their bodies. Nowhere else more than in the realm of the senses do men recognize the importance of believing right, and accurately. Suppose a man who was building an engine, should say, "What is the use of believing just so about every part of this engine? A man ought to be liberal in mechanics"! I think he would find, when he came to put his engine together, that his liberty did not amount to much. Suppose you should go to a drug-store for a prescription, with the feeling that a little more of this or a little more of that would not make much difference, and you should say to the apothecary, "Be liberal with your drugs!" Does it not make some difference, when a man is going for medicine, whether he has more or less of the different ingredients? We understand very well that in dealing with physical elements believing is important; and not only believing, but accurate believing.

Now, is believing important in matter, and not important in that which is higher than matter—mind?

Men believe in regard to ethics. They believe themselves to be accountable in regard to right and wrong. There are certain absolute qualities infused into things by the creative God. Uses determine right and wrong; and the results, reaching backward, prove some things to be good, and some to be bad. All schools agree in this: that there are certain things right and certain things wrong, and that it is important that men should know the one and the other, and that they should be accurate in their knowledge.

It is not important for my daily life that I should know whether or not property is an element which has the divine sanction; it is not important that I should know whether or not the sacredness of property arises from that which is given to it by legislation; but it is important that I should know the difference between my pocket and my neighbor's. It is not important that I should know how to manufacture paper; but it is important that I should know what paper I sign my name to. Although the grounds of ethics may give rise to infinite schools and infinite divisions among men, it is your business to know what is right, and to do it.

In every shop, on every ship, in every store, in every relation, there are certain great elements of right and wrong which every man is accountable for; and if he does not do right he cannot plead ignorance. To be ignorant in these things is to be guilty of crime. And is that so in the lower realm of life, and not so in the higher realm of manhood?

Every man is held accountable for a right knowledge of commercial law, and for a right practice of it, if he be in commerce. Every man in political life is held accountable, not for believing as it may happen, but for believing right.

Now, in moral and religious life, the same reasons which obtain in all other correlated circumstances obtain with even greater force. It is a matter of transcendent importance whether there is a God or whether there is not; and it is a matter of prodigious importance whether you believe one way or the other. Do not commit the mistake that is all the time being made, of saying, "There is a man, an atheist, who for twenty years past has not believed that there was a God; and where can you find a man that is more just, a kinder man, a better citizen? He is better than the average of Christians, if you judge by their conduct; and yet he is an atheist." Ah! you should recollect that when a man is born into Christian society, and brought up in a Christian household, so that all the periods of his life are indoctrinated by Christian ethics, the framework of his life runs up on the basis of Christian believing. Though he may not believe in Christianity intellectually, his manhood has been fashioned under Christian beliefs; and it is not fair to say that he is better than a Christian, being an atheist; for he is a product of a believing state of society. He was himself fashioned, directly or indirectly, by those very beliefs which now he rejects.

Is there nothing gained from believing in an overruling government, and in a personal God? Take that faith from society at large, and what would be the effect? I do not ask what here and there a single man, favored in his organization, well-balanced physically and morally, might be able to do without that faith; but take mankind, take society, take the average of men, and does it make no difference with their character, and conduct, and all that goes to make conduct in life, whether they feel that there is a God or not? Does it make no difference whether they believe in a malign or a benign Ruler of the universe? If they believe that God loves cruelty; that he puts blood to his lip as wine; that he is a hard master, reaping where he sowed not, and requiring where he gives no competence to fulfill; that he pushes weakness with rigorous sternness—if they believe these things, is it all the same as though they believed God to be loving, and kind, and lenient? Can a man fill heaven with a God of tyrannical nature and not have a reflection of that nature upon his own sentiments and feelings and conduct? Put into heaven a despot, and the earth will swarm with despots. Put there a Father with infinite truth and justice; put there a Being with equilibrium of faculty, but with goodness dominant and

pre-eminent, and the reflection of his attributes will be seen in the dispositions of men, in family intercourse, and in commercial jurisprudence. Earthly kings will do what they think heavenly kings do. If God has a tormenting machine, by which he punishes myriads of criminals, breaking them on the wheel; or if he has deep, dark, dank dungeons, where he immures men for infinite periods, why should not the inquisitorial scenes be revived, and why should there not be dungeons, under the direction of the imperial throne? But if cruelty is more cruel in God than in men, because he is so much greater than they are; if obligation in the direction of mercy and goodness is in the ratio of infinity; if there is no creature in the universe who is so bound to deal with men sympathetically and benevolently as God, then what a prodigious power comes upon the community from a belief in that fact! It makes a great deal of difference what sort of a God men believe in, as well as whether they believe in any God or not.

It makes a great deal of difference, too, whether men believe, in regard to themselves (I will not use the language of theology except so far as it is necessary to explain the various theories which are current) that they were born with a fallen nature. Men fell in Adam, and have been falling ever since. It is held, therefore, by certain schools in theology, that nothing which a man does in his natural state is good, and that in order to do anything good he must be absolutely changed by the grace of God. This is a very offensive way of stating it. It may be stated, however, in such a way as to be in consonance with the judgments and feelings of men. If men are born into this life without moral quality, it matters not whether they were cheated out of it in Adam, or whether their deprivation of it was a part of the method of creation. If a man is traveling, and he has no money, it does not matter whether he has not earned it, or whether it has been stolen from him. The main point is that he is without it, and is embarrassed. If men are born into life in such a state that either by one theory or another every one needs not simply growth, but conversion or change; if they need to subdue something in themselves, and to emancipate and change something as well; above all, if they need all the power that is in their own reason and will, and something more in the nature of divine inspiration; if they need in soul-culture what the flower needs in floral-culture—sunlight in the day time, with intervals of something else that comes by night; if they need that which corresponds to the summer air that calls the flower to work out its own beauty and salvation, not “with fear and trembling,” but with quivering fragrance—if men need these things, it

does not matter whether they were born at the bottom, or midway between the bottom and the top, they must go through a process of transformation. Manhood is wrought out ; it is the fruit of education ; it is the result of culture ; that inspiration which comes from the soul of God is necessary ; and it makes a great deal of difference whether a man believes one way or another about it.

A man says, " My boys are of good stock, and if I throw them into the world they will come out right." He does throw them into the world, and they go to no school, they learn no trade, they are not taught how to subdue their dispositions, they have no culture, nor help, nor anything ; and they may rise ; but it will be apt to be with the halter !

Another man says, " My children are born into life, babes. They know nothing. I must see that they learn something." They are disproportioned in their natures. The mother and the father are mixed up in them unequally. Pride in them must be kept down. The love of praise must be restrained. Conscience must be intoned. This child must have its spiritual elements developed. That child must be unfolded in some other direction.

It is of great importance whether men believe in the universal moral government of God. It is of great importance whether they have worked up that dormant spiritual nature which has been planted in them. If they believe one way, their belief leads to right culture and manhood ; if they believe the other way, it leads to the reverse.

It is of great importance whether a man thinks human nature needs change or not. Some men say that a man must be born again ; that he must have the night of conviction come down upon him so that he shall feel that he is lost ; that by-and-by, after wallowing in the regions of despair, he must come out of the night into the morning, where the Sun of Righteousness shall rise upon him with healing in his beams ; and that then he must sing as choiring birds do, with a consciousness that he is a child of God. When this has taken place, he is supposed to have given evidence of conversion. But this is a poetic and dramatic statement of an experience which may be true in a much more humble form, and with greatly reduced proportions. If a man is so convicted and so converted, that is all right ; I would not take down one banner, nor withdraw one element from the fact ; but if only they are transmuted who have gone through this form of experience, then ninety-nine in a hundred of those who are supposed to be Christians are not Christians ; for, I tell you, whatever men may say, the majority of them do not have this experience. They may think they

do ; they may work themselves into the belief that they do ; but they do not. Ninety-nine men in a hundred do not pass through any such night of conviction as many suppose to be necessary to a thorough conversion. A man hears others say, "I had an awful conviction ; I could not sleep ;" and he thinks he had an awful conviction too, because he lay awake a whole hour one night ! He hears others say, "Oh, such a dawn of glory as I had !" and he recollects a time when he had a glorious feeling ; and he recognizes it, and brings it up to what he considers the regulation pattern, and tells the committee that he has been rightly converted, and they take him into the church.

All these variations of statement do not invalidate the facts. You may work it and turn it as much as you please, but it still remains. It is true that every man comes to a point in life in which he needs the transforming power of the Spirit of God in his soul ; in which he needs moral change ; in which he needs divine inspiration and training. Does he believe it ? If he does, then his belief will work one line of conduct ; if he does not, his non-belief will work another line of conduct. If he disbelieves it, and yet lives as though he believed it, then the question is whether the indirect influences of the community are not producing upon him in some measure the effect which believing might be expected to produce.

The same is true in respect to the whole of moral character. It is a matter of supreme importance whether a man believes the great ideal of character to be, "Look every man on his own things, and not on the things of another," or whether he believes that ideal to be, "Look every man on the things of another, and not on his own things alone." "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law ;" "Let every man look after No. 1:" here are two distinct ways of stating the theory of life. Does it make no difference which road a man takes ? "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart ;" "There is no God." Does it make no difference which of these two faiths a man adopts ? "Love thy neighbor as thyself ;" "Take care of yourself ; nobody else will take care of you." Here are two creeds, that of selfishness, and that of benevolence. Does it make no difference which you accept ? Do you say, "Right believing is not of so much matter as right living ?" How is a man going to live right if he does not believe right ! A man without a belief is like a bird without a tail. A bird's tail-feathers are for him to steer by ; and if he has no tail he cannot steer himself. Belief is a man's rudder, and he who has no belief is all at sea. A man without a belief is like a mechanic without any knowledge of mechanics, or a merchant without any knowledge of those

manners and customs which regulate a merchant's affairs. In any sphere of life, is a man likely to be symmetrical and strong in the ratio of his ignorance, or in the ratio of his precise knowledge?

Now, I tell you that in religious matters it is in the ratio of right-knowing that a man is likely to be a right-minded man. The knowledge does not need to be of an abstract form; practical knowing may take the place of philosophical knowing; but to think, to think rightly, to think sharply and definitely, and to link thoughts with each other is indispensable. Right-thinking, sedulously carried forward to mark out the path of life and character, is important. And he who teaches the young that they must scorn the idea of precise beliefs, and that the better way is to come up generally is a traitor to the young. Every school, every academy, every college, every university, every department in them, is a protest against this notion of mere loose, vague, indifferent thinking. Object to this system if you please; object to that system if you please; object to abstract forms if you please; make as many criticisms about proportions as you please; but the great fact that men need to believe accurately, and that their beliefs are the foundations on which they build, is of transcendent importance.

These views are not less true or important because, on the other hand, carried to excess, and injudiciously enforced, they are mischievous. Men are drawn to religion, often, by personal influence, it is said. What is personal influence? "Why it is my father and mother; it is the aunt that reared me; it is the kind guardian that had my early confidence; and I do not remember ever to have been much taught in the church or in the catechism. I do not know that I have anything more than a general religious conviction. The reason I have lived as I have is that I have been brought up by such and such persons. Their influence kept down the bad and developed the good in me." And it is said, "What is the use of belief, if men are just as good without it as with it?" Men are not as good without it as with it, unless they have received the benefit of it through others. There is a garden of belief from which many get the fruit of believing who do not themselves believe. I do not bear the apples that I eat. The tree bears them for me. And there are people who believe, under the indirect influence of whose believing you come. Would you argue, when Peter went through the street, and people brought their sick and laid them down where his shadow might fall on them and heal them, that his shadow was not his body? How could there be a shadow if there was not a body to cast it? And if the shadow was efficacious, how much more efficacious may we suppose that the touch of the

hand, vital with power, would be ! In Christian life, those that go before cast a shadow, as it were, and we bring our children forth, in order that this shadow may heal them. By the influence of those that go before—of guardians and fathers and mothers—we are led from evil and toward good ; we are brought into sympathy with social life around us ; we are drawn to each other. If those with whom we associate are higher than we, we are carried upward by them ; if they are on a level with us, we simply fortify what we have ; if they are below us, we are attracted downward. He that keeps better company than himself rises higher ; he that keeps company no better than he is, stands still ; he that keeps worse company than himself sinks lower. Many are drawn into Christian life by the influence of those with whom they associate. Many a man has testified, “It was the godly example of my wife that subdued my nature, and brought me into this state of mind ; and I ask the church to let me in, that I may have help to live a better life.” He says, “I do not know much about theology ; I do not know much about the plan of restoration or the plan of atonement ; I do not know much about the Trinity, or the relations of the three Persons in it ; I do not know much about the abstract doctrine of moral government ; I do not know much about special providence ; but I am satisfied that I am not living as I ought to. I am convinced that it is my duty to be a better man, and I believe the church can help me to be better. I want to belong to a Christian assembly, so that I may learn to pray and to praise ; and if this is the seat of praise and prayer, I beg that you will accept me.”

There are some instances in which men are brought into the Christian life without believing ; but they are instances in which those who brought them up and shaped their life and character were believers. It is the transmitted power of belief that saves them.

When there are young pigeons born, the old ones eat grain, and turn it to milk, and eject the milk into the mouth of the young ones, and they thrive. The young pigeons have no digestive power, so the old pigeons digest for them. There is many a man whose wife, or father, or mother, or friend, gathered spiritual food for him, and wrought it into experience and sympathy, and transmitted it to him ; and it is not fair to say that a man does as well without a belief as he would with one ; for he has the advantage which comes from the believing of those who are around him.

On every side we find men who are influenced in their religious life, not so much by any system of theology that they are acquainted with, or by any Church or belief that they know about, as by the

life and conversation of believers. For thousands of years the laws and customs, natural and social, have been fashioned by Christianity. We are to remember that there is a kind of reflex light of Christianity shining all through society. Even in the store, in the shop, in commercial life, there is a large element of Christian truth; and men who have never read the Bible, who have never heard a sermon, who do not understand systematic theology at all, are Christians. They are brought up to the sphere of Christian living by a reflex Christian influence that shines upon them from the manners and customs of society.

If, besides these indirect influences, one has also clear personal knowledge and definite faith, it is all the better; but even without personal knowledge and definite faith, there may be such a thing as vicarious knowledge. As a mother thinks for the child, and brings it up virtuously; as the father takes the son and brings him up wisely; as through life the older live for the younger; so the belief of some in religious matters redounds to the salvation of others who do not believe. The vicarious influence of man on man represents the truth of God. You may understand the systems of theology and be better for it; or, you may not know anything about systems of theology, and yet receive the influence of those systems through the living personality of others.

A man brought into the Christian state and disposition by the irradiation of good-will and love may bring forth the fruit of good-will and love. It is true that he is a good man; but it is also true that his goodness is the fruit of definite truths and beliefs that have come to him through others, who have used their influence to fashion and train the true Christian character in him.

Lastly, the largest manhood requires the union of both the thoughts, the recognition, and the volition of men. While that which comes in any direction from the sympathy and co-operative influences of the household is the largest conception of a true Christian manhood, the Gospel, blessed be God, has made provision for all forms of manhood from the very highest and largest pattern down to the very lowest and least. Christ came to save the world to the uttermost. He came to take in the noblest that need him; and the lowest are not beneath his notice.

When, therefore, a man is living right in his inward life; when his soul is turned reverentially towards God; when he shows that his dispositions are just and loving towards man, he is a Christian. Though he be blind as to Scripture history, and as to the great doctrines of Christianity, the manhood in him, the life begun and flashing in him, determines that he is a Christian. Though he

is not a Christian of the largest pattern, he is to be received, "not to doubtful disputations" and fears and tremblings.

If one says to me, "Suppose a man does not believe in the inspiration of the Bible?" I reply, That word is a fog. There are twenty inspirations almost—or theories, in regard to it: which of them do you mean? "Suppose a man says that the Bible is just like any other book, would you take him into the Church?" That would depend very much on whether I thought God had received him into his personal confidence. If I thought he had, I would, on just the ground that Peter took when he said, "Forasmuch as God gave [the Gentiles] the like gift that he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, what was I, that I should withstand God?" "But suppose a man does not believe in the Trinity, would you receive him into the fellowship of the Church?" It would depend upon whether he gave evidence of being a Christian or not. "Suppose a man believes in that abominable necromancy run mad—that miserable, daft, insane thing, the Athanasian Creed; and suppose, believing in it, he is as proud and selfish and jealous as he can be; and suppose he desires to join the Church, would you receive him?" No, I would not, because the spirit of Christ is not in him. A man comes, and says, "I do not know anything about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; I am ignorant of the three Persons in the Godhead: the theory concerning them may be true, but I do not know anything about them." What *do* you know? "Well, I know that I am very weak and very sinful; I know that I have been waked up to a profound conviction of my weakness and sinfulness; I know that I earnestly every day try to please God; and I believe that the way to please him is to do good to my fellow-men, and to be obedient to his will." Would you receive such a man into the Church? I would. I would not receive him as a pattern of Christianity; I would not receive him as one who had attained all that was needful; but I would receive him, and would give him all the advantages of church organization, in order that he might attain to a larger and deeper knowledge. "Why not instruct him first, and then take him in?" Well, for the same reason that I would not wait for a foundling to prove itself to be able to live without my help, before I took it in. If a babe were left at your door, would you say, "Well, let him stay out there twenty-four hours, and if he lives, perhaps I will take him in?" and if at the end of the twenty-four hours he was not dead, would you say, "Let him alone, and if he stands it a week longer, I will take him in?" I would take him in at once, in order to give him a chance to live. And if a man has a germinal

point of Christian life, I would take him into the Church, because he, of all others, needs to be taken in.

If I take a fireman's blazing torch and rush through the street with it, you cannot very well blow it out; but if people talked in the same way about this as they do about receiving men as Christians, they would say, "Carry it into the house." If a man is strong and able to walk alone in the Christian life, people are in favor of getting him into the Church. But here comes a poor woman who wants to steal across the dark street for the doctor, and she has lighted her little candle, and the wind is out, and the flame quivers, and people say, "Do not take that in yet. Let it alone, let the wind blow upon it, and if it burns well that will be evidence that it is genuine, and ought to be taken in, while if it goes out that will be evidence that it is not genuine, and ought not to be taken in." If a man is struggling to overcome his sins, people want to let him struggle until he conquers or fails, and if he conquers, they take him into the Church; if he fails, they say that he is not fit to be in the Church. But God says, "A bruised reed I will not break, and the smoking flax I will not quench till it bring forth judgment unto victory."

If a man has a right germ in him, take him into the communion of God's people. Take him in, not because he has gone as far as he ought to go, in soul-culture, but because he needs nourishing.

Have I succeeded in doing two things? Have I succeeded in showing that it is a matter of great importance that knowledge should prevail, that it should be accurate, that the higher forms of manhood require it, and that it is required in moral life more than in æsthetical, ethical, or mechanical life? And, on the other hand, have I succeeded in making you understand (what may seem anomalous), that it is quite possible for a man to be devoid of knowledge, and yet receive from indirect influences of life, the Church itself included, such dispositions and tendencies that he may be called a Christian—and that in such case you are not to question his orthodoxy, though he be not orthodox in the head?

"Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations."

In these times when so much skepticism is abroad, and when there is so much questioning, a minister of the Gospel stands in a very peculiar, critical and difficult position. I love truth; I love new truth; I love the whole truth. When that day comes that I shall denounce honest searchers after truth in the fields of science or philosophy, may my hand forget its cunning, and my tongue cleave

to the roof of my mouth! To every honest man that is seeking a wider sphere in matter, whatever changes may be compelled by the retroactive influence of truth and large methods of investigation, I bid Godspeed. If searchers be honest and large-minded, my heart goes with them. And yet, I stand where I am obliged to preach the truth for training purposes; for purposes of moral culture; and when I see men growing heedless, in their love of material truth, and despising that other great realm of truth which includes the spiritual and inward life, I am obliged to stand between these two spheres, and say, "That is science falsely so-called which ignores this higher realm, while that system is incomplete which leaves out the lower one." The facts of nature are not all facts of matter. There is consciousness as well as phenomenon. Thoughts and emotions and dispositions are not only a part, but the blossom and fruit of nature; and science will have her chief temple and final reign when she establishes herself in the souls of men, and not simply on the terraqueous globe.

I say, then, to all men who seek to know the methods of God in creation, Godspeed you! Remember that the value of knowledge consists in the manhood which it can build in you. Build your foundations on knowledge. By the grace of God, with the help of the divine Spirit, it can build you up into everlasting life. And do not stand paltering, and saying, "How little can I get along with? There is one sphere where poverty is to be despised, and that is the sphere of spiritual things. Be rich in the knowledge of things true, and right, and virtuous, and beautiful. Live for a larger manhood. Live for a long life—so long that the earth cannot contain it, that it may betake itself to the immortalities of God.

PRAYER BEFORE THE SERMON.

KNOWN to thee already, our Father, are our wants. We do not draw near to thee to make them known, nor to remind thee of things forgotten; but, with confidence of love, with sympathy, we draw near to thee, that our souls may be refreshed in thy presence, and that we may take hold of all the bounties that have come, or are coming, upon us, as gifts of God, that we may be sensible that we receive them from thee, and that in that thought we may find more satisfaction in our blessings than we could if we took them as results of our own skill, or in forgetfulness or selfishness. Grant us that spirit, that inshining light, that inspiration, by which we are made to feel our relations to thee. Deliver us, this morning, from doubt, from all things that repel; and draw us near to thee by all those encouragements which comfort the soul, and which strengthen our faith, our hope, and our fidelity to thee. We confess our sinfulness, and we beseech of thee, day by day, to

forgive our sins and infirmities, and everything in us which offends. Give us clearer light, not only, but grace to walk in that light when it shines upon our path. By strife may victory come; and by victory, hope and full assurance of faith. And we pray that thou wilt deliver each one in thy presence from the trial and temptation incident to his special case. Thou knowest each one's want and need, and thou canst grant to every one that which he needs. We pray that thou wilt make the strength great where the burden is heavy. May the light be strong and abiding where the darkness is dense. May thy presence be very near, in all-sweet personality, to those who are afflicted with doubt, and who cry out unto thee, and hear no answer. We pray that thou wilt draw near to those that are in the midst of cares, cutting themselves, and gashing themselves. Deliver them, we pray thee, by enabling them to put their trust in thee. May they know how to avail themselves of thy watch, of thine oversight, of thy strength. We rejoice in thy providence. We pray that every one may have a consciousness that God thinks of him and overrules all things for his good. May our strength be, not in our own wisdom, nor in our own skill, but in the thought of God, and in the power of God, manifested toward us. We pray that thou wilt grant unto all those who desire it a more intimate knowledge of thee. Open the hearts of all, that the light of the truth which shines in the face of Christ may become their light—the day of their soul.

We pray that if there be those who are wandering from thy presence, they may be brought back again to the nobleness and comfortableness of Christian life.

We pray for the young, that they may begin, in the morning of life, to lay the foundation of that manhood which shall stand approved in thy sight, now, and in all the trials of life, and in the great test-hour of death. May it never seem too early for any to be manly. May it never seem too soon for any to take the life and character of Christ Jesus for their example.

We pray that the sweetness of thy presence, and the light and joy which spring from thy heart, may be the portion of every one.

Bless, we pray thee, all who this day shall preach the Gospel of Christ. May the truth be more and more powerful and precious to those who teach, and more and more fruitful in those who listen.

Spread abroad, we pray thee, the knowledge of God in Christ Jesus. May all the waste places in our land be visited. May thy truth everywhere be made known, and may it become the stability of our times.

Bless all schools, and academies, and colleges, and every seminary of learning. We pray that they may be purified, and consecrated to the work of God among men.

We pray for all churches, of every denomination. We thank thee for those things which make for unity; for more and more perfect confidence among thy disciples. Deliver men, we beseech of thee, from envy and jealousy, and from all forms of irritable controversy.

We pray that the truth may grow, and that the light of it may bring forth fruit. We pray for that truth which shall set men free from bad passions, and evil customs, and corrupt laws and institutions. We pray that those things which produce manhood may grow, and that all those things which tend to oppress men may be cast down. May superstitions cease. May pure and undefiled religion come in every heart. And may that blessed day at last dawn in which the whole world shall see thy salvation.

And to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit shall be praises evermore.
Amen.

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